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ABSTRACT

"Farewll to Manzanar" (Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James Houston), autobiographical account of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, might be used in a writing class to help students think deliberately about race and ethnicity. Writing about the book and researching the history surrounding it could serve to complicate student views of the world; it allows them to write about the government and the role the individual citizen plays in preventing the government from committing atrocities. In short, the autobiography is a means of confronting naivete. An instructor at Marquette University, however, found that her own naivete was confronted along with that of the students. If she was prepared for her students to find the internment disconcerting, she was not prepared for their "resistance": some denied that the internment was racially motivated; some suggested it was necessary; some condemned the Japanese Americans for their passive compliance with the government order and their continued belief in that government. Through a pedagogy that capitalizes on such resistance, however, students can be moved toward what Fletcher Blanchard has termed "interracial competence," a stance that would respect race and appreciate difference. In their writings, students register an increasing awareness of the complexity of racial and political issues. Having read the autobiography's first chapter, one student writes that she is ashamed of her country, while another student wonders how she could have allowed herself to wonder if those in the camps did not have it better than others. (TB)

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"But Isn't This the Land of the Free?"

Resistance and Discovery in Student Responses to Manzanar

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The first line of my title--"But Isn't This the Land of the Free?"--expresses the dismay of one of my first-year composition students at Marquette. She was writing in her journal about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. The second line of my title points to the twofold purpose of my paper here today: First, I want to tell you about the processes of resistance and discovery I have observed during three semesters at Marquette when I have asked students to research the internment and read Farewell to Manzanar, an autobiographical account of girlhood in one of those camps. Second, and more abstractly, through my reflections upon this experience, I want to suggest some theoretical underpinnings for the larger project of using multicultural course materials in a predominantly white educational setting.

This is a story about naïveté, but it is not politically innocent. I decided to use Farewell to Manzanar in my first-year composition classes because I wanted my students to think deliberately about racial and ethnic identity and about freedom. In other words, I wanted to complicate their world views. I wanted to foster imaginative engagement with a coming of age radically different from my students' own. For the first part of this project,

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I asked students to write about their readerly responses to the text itself. The book, written by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James Houston and first published in 1973, focuses primarily on the identity issues that the internment raised for Jeanne both at the camp and during her adolescence immediately afterward. The highly readable narrative evokes turbulent emotions, but it is neither bitter or condemnatory. Its starting place is a political event, but its course and ending place are primarily personal; telling her story makes it possible for Jeanne to issue the "farewell" of the title. Political judgments are left to the reader.

For second part of the project, the book became a focal point for extensive collaborative work that led to a major research paper. I designed a variety of assignments through which the students would investigate the historical circumstances surrounding the internment and the process of the United States' officially coming to terms with it. I wanted students to discover the rich complexity of library resources and the difficulty of sorting out historical "facts." I knew that the sources they would find would reflect radical shifts in public knowledge and attitudes about the internment in the approximately 50 years since February 1942. That is when FDR issued Executive Order 9066, which in effect mandated the "evacuation and relocation" of persons of Japanese ancestry from military zones along the West Coast. Students would find very little published about the internment during or just after the war, but a wealth of relevant material in recent years, including discussion of the Redress Movement that had culminated in passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. (I've listed a sampling of resources on your handout.)

Clearly, issues of race and constitutional rights are unavoidable as soon as one begins to gather information about either the camps or the redress movement. I take the internment to be a racially motivated act with dangerous implications, a government action that defied the fundamental protections of habeas corpus and due process. So, no, assigning this text and this kind of

research was hardly innocent of politics. Indeed, part of the complicating of world view that I intended was to give students an opportunity to study and write about a government, their own republic, making a mistake, and to consider what role individual citizens might have in preventing a recurrence of such error.

Nevertheless, the naïveté with which the story begins is my own. The class was reluctant to talk about race, and I was surprised.

Back in spring 1989, the first time I used these materials, I expected that some students would find it disconcerting to study the internment--only a few reported knowing about it before this class. But I was not prepared for the resistance I encountered. That is, although I expected students to be dismayed, I did not expect them to deny that the relocation was racially motivated. I did not expect them to argue that it was probably necessary. Nor did I expect them to condemn Japanese Americans for obeying Executive Order 9066 and allowing themselves to be shipped to the camps. I did not expect them to question Henry Steele Commager's report--which the Houston's use as an epigraph--that "the record does not disclose a single case of Japanese disloyalty or sabotage during the whole war." I certainly did not expect the wry comment from the back of the room that we need to watch out for Japanese "coming over here and buying up American industry like mad."

In "Multicultural Classrooms, Monocultural Teachers," Terry Dean urges the use of culturally oriented topics in multiracial classes as a way of validating the students' diversity. But my classroom was for all intents and purposes monocultural, the overwhelming majority of the students representing mainstream culture. In "Composition and Cultural Studies," James Berlin describes a writing course that uses the theory and methods of cultural studies to encourage students to resist and negotiate cultural codes. But I had students who were starting off by resisting information about something they saw as a challenge to the validity of their cultural codes.

In the longer version of this paper [forthcoming in Writing in Multicultural Settings, edited by Johnnella Butler, Juan Guerra, and Carol Severino, New York: Modern Language Association], I go into considerable detail about the theories that inform my pedagogy and my reflection upon it, and I quote extensively from student papers and my own journal. But what I have time for today is more general discussion of the resistance and discovery that I observed as students worked with the book and the research assignments.

Here's my main point. My experience with these classes suggests that a pedagogy which calls for serious, productive inquiry can capitalize upon resistance at the same time that it provides a valuable antidote to it. To speak of antidotes to resistance is, of course, not customary in discussions of critical pedagogy. Usually when theorists such as Freire, Shor, or Giroux talk about pedagogy and resistance, the goal is fostering resistance, giving it voice in a manner that leads to critical thinking, to critical reflection upon a dominant culture set in relief through reading and analysis. In my Manzanar classes, the resistance that students manifested at the outset introduced a provocative twist on this pedagogy. If their research was to lead to serious reflection, as I wanted it to, I needed to pave the way for more fundamental critical thinking that would overcome their immediate resistance to (a) the bad news of the internment itself, and (b) the necessity of talking about race as motivator and shaper of internment policy.

The resistance about which I had been naïve was, I think, itself born of naïveté. It became clear in our very first discussion of the book in class. Just before students were to begin reading it, we looked over the chronology that the Houstons include as part of their preface. A few people voiced dismay over the legalized discrimination evident in laws that excluded Asians from citizenship or denied persons ineligible for citizenship the right to own land. But members of the class seemed equally uncomfortable at the prospect of questioning Roosevelt's decision to authorize the evacuation. Many (not all)

wanted to reason away nascent disillusion by suggesting that the relocation was probably, regrettably, a military necessity. These efforts tended toward awkward generalizations about race and difference that some observers would have labeled "racist." Frankly, I had to swallow hard.

However, rather than try to challenge or correct the generalizations and rationalizations, I decided to ask questions. I pressed for clarification about "military necessity" and what might justify the removal of people who had violated no laws from their homes. Whom could we trust to assess the extent to which Japanese Americans posed a threat to U.S. security, or needed protection from other citizens? How would we recognize reliable answers about the decisions that led to the internment? Revising my sense of the students' cultural and political awareness, but not my goals for enriching it, I decided to let the Houstons' book, and later, the research materials, speak for themselves. Thus, I hoped, the students' own engagement with the material would chip away at, or perhaps even dissolve, their resistance to seeing the internment in racial terms.

As I look back on those classes and review the many pages of student writing I collected from them, my sense now is that much of my students' resistance to talking about race and to recognizing racism was rooted in naïveté and inexperience, what psychologist Fletcher Blanchard has termed "interracial incompetence." My goal could be described as moving them toward interracial competence, a stance which would respect race and appreciate difference. This stance would also make it possible for the students to begin to recognize the central role that race plays in contemporary life. My approach enacts a form of critical pedagogy; it encourages students from the dominant culture to become, in Henry Giroux's term, "border-crossers" who can--and will--explore diverse cultures and histories even though that study threatens to complicate the complacency of their political, economic, social--and racial--identities (Border Crossings 170-175).

"A way of teaching is never innocent," Berlin tells us. "Every pedagogy is imbricated in ideology, in a set of tacit assumptions about what is real, what is good, what is possible, and how power ought to be distributed." What is real, good, and possible in a composition or literature class, let me assert, are reading and inquiry that expand students' imaginations and thus their understanding of the world. This is hardly a radical position. Long before "multiculturalism" became a bone of academic contention, Louise Rosenblatt, foremother of reader-response criticism, declared that a democratic society could benefit from the potential of literary study to enhance social sensitivity and imagination. Indeed, her comments in the 1938 edition of Literature as Exploration appear prescient in relation to the internment, then only four years in the future, as well as in relation to the initial reluctance of my students to take a hard look at the internment some 50 years later:

> Many of our greatest political blunders or social injustices are the result not so much of maliciousness or conscious cruelty as of the inability of our citizens to translate into human terms the laws or political platforms they support. (218)

More recently, as part of a different conversation, Amy Ling speaks of literature's potential power to broaden readers' perceptions of race. Endorsing Ellen Messer-Davidow's proposal of perspectivism for feminist literary theory, Ling writes:

> Perspectivism would validate, respect, and encourage every perspective so that WASP males, Jewish males, black males, and white females would need to stretch themselves out of their own skins to understand Maxine Hong Kingston, Lin Taiyi, or Han Suyin, as I have always had to stretch outside of myself to understand James Fenimore Cooper, Bernard Malamud, and Richard Wright. This is what I have always believed reading literature is really all about--getting inside other people's skins and experiencing their lives. . . . (153)

My resisting students may have been naïve in their limited perceptions of racial and cultural difference. But in that first class, I was naïve in not having stopped to consider how the news of the internment might sound from inside their skins. Most had skin of the same pinkish tone as mine, but they had not had the time, never mind the opportunity, to experience literature and interracial relationships as I had. Their lives have been lived in overwhelmingly Caucasian, Eurocentric, middle-class contexts. They want "civil rights" to be over, taken care of, not their fault. They don't want to think of themselves as privileged--they want to think they, their parents and grandparents, have earned the comforts that invisibly define their lives. They also don't want to feel that a teacher may be foisting a political agenda upon them, an agenda that they might have to adopt in order to get a good grade. And who can blame them?

The many pages of student work resulting from these assignments have remediated my naïveté and complicated my world view by opening to it the tentative, naïve formulations of young white adults attempting to articulate evolving understandings of racial and cultural difference.

Once students begin reading the book, the reality of the government policy's impact on the Wakatsuki family overwhelms many of them. I ask them to record their chapter-by-chapter responses in double-entry notebooks. Early on, expressions of anger and shame are common. "It almost made me embarrassed to be an American," wrote one. Another commented:

> *At the end of the first chapter I was in shock. All of her father's rights had been taken away just because he was a Japanese fisherman. I feel ashamed.*

In what I might call Phase Three of their response, the expressions of denial and then distress are often followed by insistent questioning--"how could this happen?" This response bespeaks a desire to staunch disillusion with "facts" and explanations. Many research papers really begin here, as students

set a goal, in the words of one, "to uncover who was involved, who led the relocation and were they aware of the real situation in the camps?" Similar desires to get at "the truth" are voiced by the smaller number of students who seek to maintain a cooler, "let's look at this objectively" stance. One wrote that as he learned more about Jeanne's story, he felt disappointed by the government's actions, yet if he tried to "be objective, and look at both sides equally," he could "understand the fear" that Japanese Americans might engage in sabotage. Another commented:

> *It's not as if* [the internees] *were tortured physically or even intentionally. . . . Is it possible that the camps were truly for their own good as well as* [the good of] *other Americans?*

As the students move further into the book, another phase emerges in the protests of many (again, not all) against the internees' acceptance of their fate. "I think it's amazing that the people could remain loyal [to the U.S.] even though they were held in camps," one wrote. Another set a goal to "write about the reasons why the Japanese were so passive." Sometimes the students' surprise at Japanese Americans' compliance takes on the flavor of blaming the victim and reifies notions of Japanese as other. One woman wrote:

> *It makes me angry that these people are <u>so</u> passive about all of the hatred they are facing. They never get angry or upset that they are being persecuted because of something they can not control. I feel like they have little respect for themselves, only respect for their country* (this student meant respect for Japan and Japanese culture).

But more reading and steady research move students into a final phase, where they recognize and grapple with complex political, cultural, and yes, racial, topics. In their journal pages, at the same time that I read guileless treatments of Japanese Americans as exotic, kimono-clad Others, or as surprisingly like "regular people," I also read comments that substantiate Rosenblatt's, Ling's, and my own confidence in the power of text and

imagination to get us outside the limits of our own skins. One of the most vivid illustrations comes from a student who confessed that she had allowed herself to wonder, "didn't the Japanese in the camps have it better than others in some ways?" But then she encountered someone at a lecture who attacked feminist politics by saying, "So what if women are discriminated against sometimes? At least they don't have to serve in the military." In her journal she responded, "The stupidity of this argument brought home the fallacy of my idea that just because the Japanese in the camps were spared from combat the other injustices against them were not as great." She went on, "It is easy to use such an excuse to explain away the circumstances of the whole internment. . . . I found that the only way to overcome such ideas is to stop separating yourself from the situation and maybe try to bring it closer to home for you."

The resistance to considering racial difference and prejudice as motivating factors eroded as students began their research and read more of Farewell to Manzanar, particularly the chapters in which Jeanne has to face prejudice at school after the war. By the time they began writing their second paper, a majority of the students in all three classes where I've used the book were writing and talking about racial prejudice in connection with the internment. Some angrily saw it as the primary factor; others acknowledged it, but analyzed legal and military matters as well.

Let me wrap things up by suggesting that a genuinely multicultural pedagogy must provide room for respect not of bigotry, not by any means, but for the inexperience and naïveté of monocultural students. Blanchard's psychology research has found considerable elasticity in college students' privately held views about racism. In his study, when students walking between classes were questioned by a survey-taker, they voiced opinions about racism that reflected whatever views a third person, an undercover member of the research team, offered just prior to the student's answer. Blanchard attributes the malleability in attitudes to naïveté, that is, to a lack of

knowledge about racism and an uncertainty about how to respond to it. The problem's cause is continued racial segregation, he proposes. "Few of the many whites who have reached an honest commitment to egalitarian values have had the opportunity to acquire the full range of interpersonal skills, sensibilities and knowledge that might allow them to fulfill that commitment" (B2). Only the few, he says, are "genuinely mean spirited"; the many are naïve, inexperienced, and well-intentioned (B2).

Unfortunately, despite good intentions, monoculturalism is pandemic. Education that attempts to counter it must itself embody the values of respect and justice that it means to promote. Confronted with challenges to their cultural assumptions, assumptions that support mainstream ideology, students imbued with the dominant culture may initially begin the discussion by resisting. If we ask them to engage in inquiry that investigates the terms and justification of their resistance, we can point them toward new knowledge that may lead after all to the "civic courage" that Giroux sees as the culmination of a resistance which counters dominant ideology. "Civic courage," he says, entails "the willingness to act as if [one] were living in a democratic society" (Theory and Resistance 201).

Before I close, I think it's important to note that the pedagogy and materials I have described are meant to take issues of race beyond the comfortable notion of cultural diversity that Giroux says typically limit "liberal" approaches to difference (Border Crossings 171). Rather, a major part of my project depends upon the fact that when one studies the World War II internment of Japanese Americans, race and racism are inescapable. They are central to political, social, and economic realities. Students' initial discomfort tends to ease because the situation is removed in time and because, they discover, specific steps have been taken to remediate its impact. Nevertheless, their most important discovery is that ultimately there is no denying either analogies to other racially-defined confrontations or the

possibility of a parallel incident, should the right configuration of circumstances present itself. (Although the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a few convictions of people who declined to cooperate with the executive order, it has never ruled on the constitutionality of the internment itself.)

Racial difference is not a nostalgic precursor of the melting pot. There is no melting pot. Furthermore, there is no denying the complicity of complacency in the material and spiritual suffering of people who are marginalized. Nevertheless, marginalizing the complacent in the classroom is likely to work against the changes in attitude--and social conditions--that many educators--certainly this one--seek to foster. The "border pedagogy" that Giroux describes depends upon teachers' ability "to listen critically to the voices of their students." That is how we become and model border-crossers. We do this not only by making "different narratives available to [our]selves and . . . students" but also, in Giroux's words, by "legitimating difference as a basic condition for understanding the limits on one's own voice" (170). Let me repeat that last idea; it's an important goal--"legitimating difference as a basic condition for understanding the limits on one's own voice."

What I'm adding to Giroux is the idea that pedagogical practice which, in his words, "takes seriously how ideologies are lived, experienced, and felt at the level of everyday life" (176) must provide for listening to and negotiating with inexperienced students who may fit Blanchard's description of "interracially incompetent." Building toward a true multiculturalism means using culturally diverse materials not as dogma or indoctrination but as part of a larger process of educating students about the power of reading and writing as tools of critical inquiry. Our multicultural land of the free has many voices, many ears, many opportunities for change.

(H A N D O U T)

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** Selected Resources re the Internment and Redress Movement **

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Note: The official Library of Congress subject heading is "Japanese Americans--Evacuation and Relocation"

Further note: the top floor of the Smithsonian's American History Museum has an extensive permanent display about the internment, including interactive video. The recreated living quarters are from Manzanar.